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Making the Invisible Visible

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Military Art in the 20th & 21st Centuries

Laura Brandon

Shellshock, combat stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder, or collectively, operational stress, are among a number of terms we have applied at various times to mental breakdown in wartime. So how have artists depicted them and what are the challenges they have faced? This article briefly examines some of the very few 20th & 21st century examples of artwork about this subject in a Canadian context of which I am aware. The artists include contemporary Canadian portraitists Gertrude Kearns and Elaine Goble, Canadian historical painter Charles Comfort, and British historical muralist Colin Gill.

: Shellshock, combat stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are terms we have applied to mental breakdown under the stress of conflict. They are injuries of the mind and not of the body. So how have artists depicted them and what are the challenges they have faced? This article examines works by two contemporary Canadian artists, Gertrude Kearns and Elaine Goble, one Canadian historical painter, Charles Comfort, and one British historical muralist, Colin Gill. The work of these four artists sheds light on historic and contemporary debates about conflict-induced mental illness. They show how public and personal perceptions of these diseases in the 20th & 21st century have affected the production, representation, and reception of such images.

A 1678 article is the earliest reference to operational stress.¹ Author Johannes Hofer observed Swiss mercenaries variously affected by dejection, melancholy, homesickness, insomnia, weakness, lack of appetite, anxiety, fever, and heart palpitations. If not sent home, he noted, they died or went mad. From this catalogue of symptoms later medical practitioners coined the generic term “nostalgia” with its underlying reference to the missed comforts of home. Until the First World War, many doctors believed nostalgia was a physical and not a mental illness. At the beginning of the First World War, some applied the word “hysteria” to those considered to be under mental strain. It was caused, they said, by a lack of willpower, laziness, and moral depravity. Today, operational stress is a relatively well-known psychiatric condition whose physical symptoms include cold sweats, dizziness, stomach problems, and a distant or haunted look, the so called “1000-yard stare.” The mental and emotional symptoms include difficulty in remembering details or not paying attention, troubled sleep, crying, anger, grief, and communication difficulties.² All the artwork referred to in this article references in some way such symptoms of operational stress.

What is manifestly clear from the symptoms I have listed is that they are not only varied but also are symptomatic of other conditions. You can have, for example, an upset stomach from eating tainted food, break into a cold sweat out of fear, or have trouble remembering details because you are old and have Alzheimer’s. So how do the few artists known to depict operational stress do so in Canadian war-related subjects? Is there a common and recognizable iconography? I would

Résumé : Traumatisme dû au bombardement, stress de combat, trouble de stress post-traumatique (TSPT), voilà des expressions appliquées à des dépressions nerveuses survenues suite à la tension subie lors d'un conflit. Ce sont des blessures mentales et non corporelles. Comment les artistes les ont-ils dépeintes et à quels défis ont-ils dû faire face ? L'article s'attarde à l'analyse des œuvres de deux artistes canadiens contemporains, Gertrude Kearns et Elaine Goble, et deux autres qu'intéresse l'histoire : le peintre canadien Charles Comfort et le muraliste britannique Colin Gill. L'art de ces quatre créateurs met en lumière les débats, anciens et modernes, sur les troubles mentaux affligés par la guerre. Les œuvres illustrent comment la perception de ces maladies, de la part du public et de gens en particulier, au vingtième siècle, a pu toucher la production, la représentation et la réception de telles images.

argue that there is not and that recognition that an artwork is about operational stress rests on the artist ensuring that the viewer knows this to be the case – through the work's title, for example – or by critical evaluation on the part of the viewer.

My own analysis in the absence of written evidence leads me to conclude that the first two paintings I am going to discuss: one from the First World War and the other from the Second World War, depict operational stress. I draw my findings from research pertaining to these conditions as we experience and understand them today, from visual and circumstantial evidence of the time, and because of luck. In the case of the post-Second World War art I will subsequently discuss, the artists state their work depicts operational stress.

Colin Gill was born in England in 1892 and trained at the Slade School in London. He enlisted in 1914 at the beginning of the First World War and, as an artillery officer, found himself in France in 1915. By 1916 the Army had seconded him to the Royal Engineers as a camouflage officer. In 1918, he became an official war artist with the British war art program and

began a series of paintings based on his recent personal experience of the conflict. The Canadian war art program, known as the Canadian War Memorials Fund, acquired one work from him completed in 1920, *Canadian Observation Post*.³ After the war, Gill became a noted muralist. He died suddenly in 1940.

The Fund exhibited Gill's painting only in North America in 1920 as the organization's existence and its exhibition program were ending.⁴ He originally titled the painting *The Widow's House*, evinced in the patches of wallpaper, the broken shutters, and the wooden chair.⁵ The Fund's extant documentation is sparse as a whole and there is little in the archives of the Imperial War Museum, the custodian of Gill's British commissions, so we have no written information about the Canadian piece. We do not know what led Gill to include in this painting a man (the figure on the lower right) who I believe to be suffering from shellshock, a First World War term for operational stress. I base my conclusion on the fact that he is not involved in what is going on around him, has dispensed with his protective steel helmet, and is covering his ears with his hands.

Sensitivity to noise after innumerable artillery barrages was a common symptom of shellshock. Furthermore, the fact that he is sitting on a non-military chair suggests a link with the older description of the condition as nostalgia or homesickness.

For me, the hands over the ears are the telling clues because this painting is about keeping going (or not so doing through death or shellshock) in an environment that reverberated with the continuous loud, shocking sounds of shells exploding. The painting includes elements of an artillery subject Gill completed for the British scheme entitled *Observation of Fire* (1919) that he described at the time as "Gunner [or artillery] officers correcting their battery fire by field telephone from a disused trench in No Man's Land."⁶ Clearly based on his experiences with the Royal Artillery, in *Canadian Observation Post* the figures to the right and the landscape in the background derive from *Observation of Fire*. In *Canadian Observation Post*, the camouflage that protects the officers peering through binoculars is evidence of Gill's later military experience in a camouflage unit. *Canadian Observation Post* and the other painting he completed on this scale, the Imperial War Museum's *Heavy Artillery*, include many similar elements and details that speak to personal experience.⁷ Experience would have exposed Gill to shellshock as it affected hundreds of thousands of soldiers.⁸

That this element of the painting is a recent revelation on my part is attributable simply to the fact that after the First World War the painting went into storage until 2000 and therefore was not easily viewable.⁹ If visitors identified this subject as suffering from shellshock

Canadian Observation Post
by Colin Gill



Canadian War Museum (CWM) 19710261-2189

Sergeant P.J. Ford
by Charles Comfort

when the painting was on exhibit in 1920, they did not publicize it.¹⁰ A 2004 Department of National Defence online publication about operational stress reproduces the painting because conclusions as to what is happening to the man in the painting are today more or less shared.¹¹ This is due, in part, because since 2000, the painting and its description of shellshock have been on almost constant view.¹² The best-selling book, *Canvas of War* (2000), reproduces it on the back cover.¹³ Furthermore, as this article makes clear, there are very few identified paintings showing operational stress, which, in an era that has made mental illness a significant concern, attaches additional value to any depictions.

Charles Comfort (1900-1994) was an official war artist during the Second World War attached to the Canadian Army. Later, he became director of the National Gallery of Canada. During the war, he painted across Europe seeing and experiencing much although never as an active soldier. Most of his work is portraiture. His 1944 depiction of bright-eyed, blue-eyed Sergeant Ford evokes another term for operational stress, "the 1000-yard stare."¹⁴ On the back of this painting, however, Comfort does not once note that his subject might be suffering from any kind of mental anguish. Instead, he details Ford's remarkable service in North Africa and Italy. Nor does he mention Ford in the published version of his war diary (1956).¹⁵ Comfort's grandson, however, added Ford as an illustration in the 1995 edition of this work.¹⁶ Ford's prominent appearance in the 1978 travelling art exhibition and catalogue *A Terrible Beauty*, but without explanation beyond that noted by Comfort, possibly influenced the inclusion of



this work.¹⁷ So on what basis is this painting about operational stress?

In 2002, Ford's granddaughter called me unexpectedly. Her grandfather had just died. Comfort, she said, painted her relative within hours of the death of his closest friend, a man with whom he had grown up, enlisted, and fought.¹⁸ In this light, we can understand Ford's tense appearance as stress. In 2005, the war museum included a reproduction of this painting in its Second World War gallery alongside an account of the circumstances surrounding its creation. Nearly two million people have visited this museum since it opened and many of them will have seen this image and its label. It is therefore not surprising that a recent edition of *Canadian Military Journal* uses Ford's portrait to illustrate an article on operational support and bears the caption that it "evocatively captures the strain of battle as experienced during the Italian Campaign."¹⁹ Once again, the public identification of the subject in one sphere has led to agreement on its meaning in another.

In 2002, working from a series of photographs of Canadian General Roméo Dallaire that she had collected, Toronto contemporary artist Gertrude Kearns (born 1950) painted six larger-

than-life portraits of the soldier on sheets of camouflage-patterned cloth.²⁰ For at least a decade, Kearns had been exploring military art subjects in her practice. She has painted the men who tortured and killed Shidane Arone in Somalia in 1993, worked as a commissioned war artist in Afghanistan in 2006, and completed a number of portraits of historical and contemporary Canadian commanders including Generals Brock and MacKenzie, 200 years apart in history. The Dallaire portraits were part of an exhibition entitled *UNdone/Dallaire/Rwanda* about the 1994 Rwanda genocide and the effect it had on the general.²¹ Dallaire, as is well known, subsequently suffered significant mental anguish and, as a result, became an advocate for better help for soldiers affected by what experts now call post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. As a result, although Kearns has painted Dallaire's evolving reactions to the genocide in six paintings, in a 2003 article in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, artist Vivian Tors interpreted the portraits as corresponding to what she understood to be the six stages that a PTSD victim goes through.²² If Kearns had painted the works eight years earlier at the time of the

Dallaire #6**by Gertrude Kearns**

I used the stretchers as a metaphor for the attitude toward injury. There are stages...of recovery indicated by...a stretcher which is closed at the end – maybe one culmination of treatment. There's one that's misty... [emblematic of] different overtones to...psychiatric intervention and the resulting care of the victim.²⁴

That the subject of *Injured: PTSD* agreed to be painted (Dallaire did not sit for his portraits) indicates a collaboration between sitter and artist. In this instance, the emblematic material the artist used to make her subject's mental condition visible was hers.

Ottawa artist Elaine Goble's (born 1956) 2006 portrait of a Second World War veteran in old age entitled *The Propagandist: Portrait of Frank Healey* incorporates elements that the subject asked the artist to include to characterize his post-war mental state, challenges he did not fully recognize and was unable to label for many decades.²⁵ According to Goble, Frank Healey, the subject of the drawing, agreed that PTSD would now be the diagnosis given to his post-war state of mind.²⁶ Goble's portrayal of Healey is in keeping with her other works. Her graphic portraits of veterans are well known and one of her designs appears on a 2005 25-cent coin commemorating the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

During this war, Healey worked in Naval Information, generating stories ranging from operational tragedies and successes to recruitment and propaganda.²⁷ Overseas for most of the conflict, he found the time exciting, adrenalin-filled, dramatic, and romantic. Life after 1945 was dull by these standards and he became a heavy drinker and smoker. His wife,

Gertrude Kearns Dallaire #6, artist's collection



genocide and not when Dallaire's battle with PTSD was becoming public knowledge, the interpretation she placed on the series might have retained its different voice in public.

If the portraits of Dallaire are not about PTSD but we view them as such, then the difficulties we have in discerning PTSD as the subject of Kearns's commissioned portrait of a PTSD sufferer is ironic. Veterans Affairs Canada learned of *Injured: PTSD* in 2002 while Kearns worked with a soldier in her Toronto studio.²³ It was an offshoot of the Dallaire works in progress at the time and together they represented her developing interest in visualizing the disorder. Coinciding with the beginning of Canada's active participation in

the conflict in Afghanistan in 2002, the department sought to bring recognition to PTSD by acquiring a painting it could then donate to the Canadian War Museum. Like Dallaire, the subject had been in Rwanda, which the artist symbolized by including something akin to the country's reddish ground at his feet. However, because the subject asked to be anonymous, and the artist and the department have respected his anonymity, the painting defies the easy analysis of the Dallaire portraits. There are clues but they require explanation – the stretchers, the clutched UN beret, and, of course, the 1000-yard stare. What Kearns says about the stretchers gives an indication of the subtlety of the piece:

Injured: PTSD

by Gertrude Kearns

who had also enjoyed an exciting war, reacted similarly and, in later life, doctors diagnosed her as bipolar. A perfectly normal-looking photograph is the basis for the elongated image of the couple in wartime on the left of the drawing. At Healey's request, Goble distorted the photographic image as testament to the couple's post-war stresses and to Mrs. Healey's undiagnosed medical condition. Her condition was present during the war, but it was imperfectly coped with, and it was not until much later that they understood it as a contributing factor to their difficult post-war lives.

This article has shown that through an analysis of selected artworks it is possible to map an evolving trajectory as far as visual depictions of operational stress are concerned. During the First and Second World Wars, if operational stress was depicted, artists did not acknowledge it as subject matter, a task left to others to discern later when the artwork was viewable. For Canadian contemporary artists, the 1994 Rwanda genocide was a major turning point in terms of depictions. On the one hand, we have Gertrude Kearns's six portraits of General Dallaire, in which he had no active part in but which, because of his diagnosis and the time at which they were painted, others interpret as portraits of PTSD. On the other hand, we have a national public institution – Veterans Affairs – commissioning a portrait of a PTSD victim in which the cooperative subject chooses anonymity. In both cases, the sufferers of operational stress are keen to publicize their illness but are not keen for us to know

The Propagandist: Portrait of Frank Healey

by Elaine Goble



who they are. In Goble's painting of Frank Healey, we have a subject actively encouraging an artist to depict his illness and identify him with PTSD, even though we might deem aspects of his mental strain as peripherally related to the condition.

While the work of the four artists included in this article sheds some light on past and contemporary debates about conflict-induced mental illness, what is clear is that any 20th and 21st century depiction emerges from a multi-relational base. As historian Peter Leese argues in his book *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and British Soldiers of the First World War*, operational stress is "an entirely unstable condition that slips from one part of the collective mind to another, changing its name and its form as surrounding conditions and expectations alter."²⁸ As we have seen in this brief exploration, public and personal perceptions and understandings of this illness in the 20th century have affected the production, display, representation, and reception of depictions of it. Together these factors have limited the easy identification of artworks about operational stress and, to a degree, hindered any broad public understanding as to its undoubted prevalence during and after Canada's 20th century wars, hindrances of a sort that do not figure in wartime battle or equipment pictures. The near invisibility of operational stress as a visual record has contributed to an understanding of the nature and complexity of war that remains, even today, troublingly incomplete.

Notes

1. The information in this paragraph is taken from Allan D. English, "Leadership and Operational Stress in the Canadian Forces," *Canadian Military Journal* (Autumn 2000), pp.33-38.
2. C.J. Young, "Stress Injury and Operational Deployments," *Dispatches: Lessons Learned*

- for *Soldiers* 10, no 1 (February 2004), pp.7-8.
3. Colin Gill, *Canadian Observation Post*, 1920, oil on canvas, 185 x 243 cm, Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19880266-003.
4. It was exhibited in *Canadian War Memorials Paintings Exhibition, 1920: The Last Phase*. This toured to Montreal and Toronto.
5. This title is noted on the back.
6. Colin Gill, *Observation of Fire*, 1919, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 50.8 cm, Imperial War Museum Art 2297. This painting, and the one referenced next, may be viewed on the Imperial War Museum website: <www.iwmcollections.org.uk/qryArt.php>
7. Colin Gill, *Heavy Artillery*, 1919, oil on canvas, 182.8 x 317.5 cm, Imperial War Museum, Art 2274.
8. A copy of Leo van Bergen's lecture on First World War shellshock numbers is found at <wereldoorlog1418.nl/shell-shock/index.html> accessed 18 September 2008.
9. Canadian War Museum Loan Card, Gill, Colin, *Canadian Observation Post*.
10. No mention of this painting is found in the media reports from the time of its exhibition in Toronto and Montreal. Copies of this coverage are found in the Canadian War Museum corporate files under Laura Brandon/Canadian War Memorials Building Article/Research and Correspondence/2008-001-Box 2.
11. Young, "Stress Injury and Operational Deployments," p.2.
12. In the Canadian War Museum exhibition *Canvas of War* (2000-2004) and in the museum's library since 2005.
13. Dean Oliver and Laura Brandon, *Canvas of War: Painting the Canadian Experience, 1914-1945* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2000).
14. Charles Comfort, *Sergeant P.J. Ford*, 1944, watercolour on paper, 38.8 x 57.1 cm, Canadian War Museum, Beaverbrook Collection of War Art, 19710261-2189.
15. Charles Comfort, *Artist at War* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1956).
16. Charles Comfort, *Artist at War* (Pender Island, BC: Remembrance Books, 1995), plate 35.
17. Heather Robertson, *A Terrible Beauty* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1978).
18. Brief handwritten notes recording this conversation are in Canadian War Museum Artist File, Comfort, Charles.
19. J. Don Richardson, Kathy Darte, Stéphane Grenier, Allan English, and Joe Sharpe, "Operational Stress Injury Social Support: A Canadian Innovation in Professional Peer Support," *Canadian Military Journal* 9, no. 1, p.61.
20. Gertrude Kearns's *Dallaires* #1-6 are all enamel and oil on nylon and vary in size from 170 to 180 x 155 cm. All are in the artist's collection.
21. Gertrude Kearns, *Undone Dallaire/Rwanda*, Propeller Gallery, Toronto 30 October - 16 November 2002.
22. Vivian Tors, "Camouflage and Exposure," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 168,

no. 9 (29 April 2003), pp.1164-5. The 6 diagnostic criteria for PTSD in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1994) may be summarized as:

- A. Exposure to a traumatic event
- B. Persistent re-experience (eg. flashbacks, nightmares)
- C. Persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma (eg. inability to talk about things even related to the experience, avoidance of things and discussions that trigger flashbacks and re-experiencing symptoms, and fear of losing control)
- D. Persistent symptoms of increased arousal (eg. difficulty falling or staying asleep, anger and hyper-vigilance)
- E. Duration of symptoms more than one month
- F. Significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (eg. problems with work and relationships)

23. Gertrude Kearns, *Injured: PTSD*, acrylic on canvas, 191 x 145 cm, Canadian War Museum, 20050005-001. The Department of National Defence's Operational Stress Injury Social Support unit identified her subject for her.
24. Gertrude Kearns interviewed by Mai-yu Chan, 6 May 2005, Canadian War Museum, George Metcalf Archival Collection, Oral History Program, 31D 6, Kearns.
25. Elaine Goble, *The Propagandist: Portrait of Frank Healey*, 2006, graphite on paper, 81 x 101.8 cm, Canadian War Museum 20060108-001.
26. Elaine Goble in conversation with the author, 1 September 2008.
27. The information in this paragraph is found in the artist's statement, 2 July 2006, Canadian War Museum Artist File, Goble, Elaine.
28. Peter Leese, *Shell Shock: Traumatic Neurosis and British Soldiers of the First World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p.176.

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